

# Animal Rights: Why Should It Concern Me?

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**Q. What does it mean to be in favor of animal rights?**

**A.** To be in favor of animal rights is to acknowledge that animals feel pain and that we should avoid causing them pain. The animal rights movement contends that animals are not mere commodities to be used by humans, but rather our moral equals who have the right to live free of abuse and exploitation. Hence, as it is unethical to exploit humans, regardless of what interest may be served by their exploitation, it is also unethical to harm or exploit animals for any purpose (whether it be for food, clothing, entertainment, or science). Discrimination based on species membership

(speciesism) is no less of an injustice than discrimination based on other irrelevant characteristics (e.g., race, gender, class, or sexual orientation). All of these prejudices are based on perceived inferiority, thereby attempting to justify the ruthless domination of an entire group.

**Q. Obviously humans should have rights, but aren't animals inferior to us and thus not deserving of rights?**

**A.** Many arguments are used to justify speciesism, or placing animals in an inferior position to humans. Most of these argu-

ments are based on the fact that humans are rational and more intelligent than other animals. These two facts, however, are morally irrelevant. Many animals are more rational and intelligent than human infants and even some seriously retarded human adults. This does not mean that human infants or seriously retarded adults should not have rights. It does mean, however, that these two criterion are morally insufficient characteristics to justify human supremacy.



**"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."**

**—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

The only morally relevant characteristic that is needed to warrant the granting of rights is the capacity to feel pain and suffering. In other words, if an individual can suffer, we have a moral obligation to do what we can to avoid inflicting suffering unto him or her.

**Q. Exactly what rights should animals have?**

**A.** As humans and other animals are not exactly the same, it makes sense that they should not have the same exact rights. For example, all humans should have the right to vote. However, nonhuman animals are incapable of understanding the concept of democracy or voting and therefore do not need this right. Similarly, fowl have a strong biological need to flap their wings and fly, whereas humans do not. Therefore, humans do not need this right, while fowl do.

But generally speaking, animals should have the right to live, to avoid pain, to pursue happiness, to exist on a healthy planet, and to be free from exploitation, regardless of what human interest may be served by their pain or exploitation.

**Q. How can you prove that animals feel pain?**

**A.** The same question could be posed with regard to whether it is possible to know if other humans feel pain. If you have never experienced someone else's suffering, how can you know if it's real? Aside from the evolutionary usefulness of pain, there are many ways to conclude that others suffer. Science tells us that if a being possesses both a central nervous system and a brain, it can be deduced that he or she is not only capable of suffering, but is also aware of that pain. Almost all animals possess both central nervous systems and brains. Also, common sense tells us that when we kick dogs, they yelp. When we brand horses, they scream and display facial contortions indicating a state of agony. Animals are not mere machines who respond with artificial cries for help. On the contrary, they are fully capable of suffering and have rich emotional lives.



Millions of animals are killed every year for their fur.

**Q. If the animals are raised to be eaten or otherwise used, isn't that okay?**

**A.** Two hundred years ago in the U.S., humans raised other humans for the purpose of making them into slaves. The fact that these humans were raised to be slaves did not justify their slavery. For the same reason, raising animals for the purpose of torturing and/or killing them does not justify their exploitation.

**Q. But animal exploitation is legal.**

**A.** In the U.S., it was once legal to own human slaves. In Nazi Germany, it was legal to torment and kill Jews. Cock-fighting was legal throughout the U.S. The legality of something does not determine its morality.

**Q. Didn't God give human beings dominion over other animals?**

**A.** First, we must recognize that there are hundreds of religions around the world, some of which command us to abstain from harming other animals. However, it is true that the Judeo-Christian Bible states that humans have "dominion" over other animals. Even if we accept Judeo-Christianity as the only true religion and the Bible as the literal word of God, in its original context, the word "dominion" is defined as "humane stewardship."

Torturing and killing billions of animals on a yearly basis for largely unnecessary purposes (e.g., palate preference, clothing, or entertainment) hardly seems to fit this definition.



The vast majority of animals raised for food are intensely confined on factory farms.

**Q. Other animals eat each other. Why can't we eat them?**

**A.** Predators in the wild kill other animals out of necessity. Without doing so, they would not survive. Humans, on the other hand, kill other animals by choice. The human body has no need for animal flesh whatsoever. In fact, it has even been proven consistently that a vegan (pure vegetarian) diet is far healthier than a diet rich in animal products. Eating animals is not necessary for human survival. Rather, it is a matter of morality: is it acceptable to inflict unconscionable suffering and death unto countless animals for something that is indisputably unnecessary?

**Q. Humans are the fittest animal on Earth. Why shouldn't we use our strength to our benefit?**

**A.** The argument that "might makes right" has been used by many (including Hitler) to justify many forms of cruelty and domination throughout history. Just as rationality and intelligence are insufficient characteristics to justify human supremacy, so is strength.

**Q. What about vivisection that would lead to medical breakthroughs for humans?**

**A.** First, the premise of vivisection is inherently flawed. Humans and other animals are so biologically different that most of the time, the effects of one substance on an animal subject will be totally different from the results on a human subject. More importantly however, there is such a thing as "ill-gotten gains." If we were to force unwilling human subjects into a painful experiment that could possibly help other humans, would it be acceptable? Note that this is exactly what Nazis did to their victims.

As humans are the moral equals of other animals, maiming and ultimately killing an unwilling human in hopes that other humans may benefit is the moral equivalent of maiming and ultimately killing an animal with the hope that her or his suffering might help some humans.

**Q. Where do you draw the line? Insects? Plants? Bacteria?**

**A.** If the only morally relevant characteristic is the capacity to suffer, then the vast majority of animals would qualify for the granting of rights. There are some animals (such as extremely small insects) who we are not completely certain are capable of suffering. It is up to each individual to decide where she or he feels the line should be drawn exactly.

However, it is indisputable that all of the animals we institutionally exploit are capable of suffering and therefore deserve the right to be free. Also, because of their lack of a central nervous system or brain, it is certain that plants and bacteria do not suffer.

**Q. Wouldn't the economy be crippled if we abolished animal exploitation?**

**A.** The profitability of something does not determine its morality. Many institutions were extremely profitable, yet inherently unethical. For example, after the abolition of slavery in the U.S., the South had to rebuild its economy through a Reconstruction period. Does this mean that the abolition of slavery or child labor should not have occurred?

Also, the chance of animal exploitation being abolished all at once is basically nonexistent. Rather, as consumer demand gradually decreases for animal products, the meat industry will gradually fade out. With its demise will come the expansion of the vegetarian food market, and therefore many job openings in that market.



**Animals forced to perform for human "entertainment" suffer both physical and psychological abuse, such as beatings, food deprivation, and even electrocution.**

**Q.** It's impossible to live completely cruelty-free. Almost everything we do causes someone suffering. Why try at all?

**A.** True, it is very hard to eliminate all forms of cruelty in our lives. However, that doesn't justify an "open season" for blatant animal abuse. By adopting a vegan diet, boycotting companies that test on animals, choosing not to wear animal skins, and boycotting shows that exploit animals for entertainment, we can drastically reduce the amount of suffering we cause in our daily lives.

While we can't completely eliminate the suffering we cause, by taking these simple steps to respect basic animal rights, we can seriously reduce the suffering we cause, and even rid the world of various forms of institutionalized animal abuse.

**Q.** What can I do to help animals?

**A.** The best way to help animals is to stop eating them. By switching to a vegan diet, we reduce an enormous amount of complicity in animal exploitation.

Similarly, refusing to wear animals reduces our complicity as well. The fur, leather, and wool industries all inflict intense pain and suffering unto animals.

Boycotting companies that conduct animal tests is another way to help. By boycotting these companies and letting them know, we send a loud and clear message that we refuse to fund animal cruelty.



Just as we shouldn't fund companies that exploit animals for testing purposes, we shouldn't fund ones that exploit animals for human "entertainment." Rodeos, zoos, and circuses with animal "performers" all exploit animals in extremely cruel and unjust ways.

In addition to not funding animal exploitation, pick up some of the following books and share them with friends:

**The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for whites or women for men.**

—Alice Walker

- 🐾 *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer
- 🐾 *Vegan: The New Ethics of Eating* by Erik Markus
- 🐾 *Beyond Prejudice* by Evelyn Pluhar
- 🐾 *Morals, Reason, and Animals* by Steve Sapontzis

- 🐾 *Taking Animals Seriously* by David DeGrazia
- 🐾 *Created from Animals* by James Rachels
- 🐾 *The Case for Animal Rights* by Tom Regan
- 🐾 *The Sexual Politics of Meat* by Carol Adams
- 🐾 *Animals, Property, and the Law* by Gary Francione

For more information on animal rights, please contact:



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